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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002130

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A
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SUBJECT: PRT LASHKAR GAH: AIR STRIKE IMPACTS PROGRESS IN
NAHRI SARRAJ

Classified By: A/DCM Carol Rodley reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Taliban hijacked what should have been a successful week in Helmand Province and forced President Karzai's hand in making a statement critical of ISAF. The week of June 18 started promisingly in Helmand's Nahri Sarraj district with a school construction groundbreaking ceremony and a shura with local elders delivering positive messages on education and reconstruction. It ended with a clash between ISAF and Taliban forces on June 22, a fight that included an air strike that resulted in claims of 25 civilian casualties.

Afghan officials attending the memorial service June 23 offered regrets but also delivered the message that ISAF was not responsible for the deaths; they also appealed for calm. They were in turn accused of working with those responsible for the incident. Some locals do blame the Taliban for the deaths, as many resent the Taliban tactic of occupying and shooting from houses. Given that the locals are not strongly pro-Taliban, that a weak but active Afghan government presence is reaching out to the local community, and that district residents tend to accommodate themselves to the forces in control, this incident likely will slow progress towards stabilizing the district but not halt it. Expect engagement to resume, but anything more than cautious accommodation from locals will only follow consistent delivery of security, government services and reconstruction to the district. END SUMMARY

Clash Mars Progress in Stabilizing Nahri Sarraj District

¶2. (C) The week of June 18 started on a positive note for efforts to stabilize Nahri Sarraj district, following ISAF's and the Afghan Government's (GOA) prosecution of Operation Silicon. A groundbreaking ceremony for construction of a new school was followed by a shura called by the Mayor of Gereshk (the district's seat of government). Officials exhorted elders to spread a message in support of education and development. Efforts were undercut on June 22, when ISAF forces came under attack by Taliban forces. Fighting lasted for several hours before ISAF called in an air strike on a compound several kilometers outside Gereshk that locals claim resulted in approximately 25 civilian and 20 Taliban casualties, including women and children.

13. (C) According to an Afghan source, the compound hit by the air strike was in a village called Haji Sher Agha Kali in an area known as Deh Adam Khan. The populace in that area is largely the Barakzai tribe, the district's majority tribe, though the village reportedly is home to other tribes, including the Isahqzai. The Taliban have supporters amongst nearly all tribes in Helmand, but the Isahqzai are known to have significant links to both the Taliban and narco-trafficking. The casualties came from two prominent families, one from the Barakzai tribe and the other from the much smaller Muhammadzai tribe. Among those killed was a local mullah.

Tensions Rise But GOA Officials Calm Villagers

14. (C) While it is difficult to gauge the reaction across the entire district, there was considerable outrage among many locals following the incident. Local officials overruled efforts to display bodies of the dead in the Gereshk district center, an act that could well have ratcheted up the tension.

15. (C) Provincial and district officials attended a memorial service held in Gereshk on June 23. Police Chief Hussain Andwali attended and later told PRT representatives that GOA officials were met with anger and accusations that they were working with foreigners responsible for the civilian deaths. Andwali said GOA officials and local mullahs offered their regrets, told the outraged locals that ISAF was not to blame for the deaths, and explained that ISAF tries to prevent such incidents. The Deputy Governor, Haji Pir Mohammad (HPM), telling those assembled that President Karzai asked him to

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attend, delivered the same message. All of the officials appealed for calm, and Andwali said that their efforts were successful in easing tensions. (NOTE: On June 23 President Karzai publicly criticized NATO and Coalition forces for "careless operations" that have resulted in civilian deaths. Some local contacts believe that his statement also contributed to the reduction in tensions in the district, since it likely satisfied local demand that ISAF be blamed. END NOTE.)

Anger at ISAF, But Also at the Taliban

16. (SBU) Several local sources report that a significant number of people in Nahri Sarraj hold the Taliban responsible for the deaths. Sources claim that many people in the district understand that the Taliban tactic of firing at ISAF from local houses means villages are being used as shields. They highlight that failure to cooperate with the Taliban results in death.

Comment

17. (C) The incident is a setback for the district, but support for the Taliban is not as strong in Nahri Sarraj as in neighboring Sangin district, and there is local willingness to point the finger at the Taliban. The GOA also has a stronger presence in Nahri Sarraj than in Sangin, providing an opportunity to underscore that the GOA and international community are prepared to support development.

WOOD